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Bud Promises

Did the Eisenhower Administration enter into a secret agreement with the Chinese Nationalist Government in 1955 to help defend the Quemoy and Matsu Islands against "aggression"? Brig. Gen. Thomas R. Phillips (Ret.) has made a flat statement to this effect in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on the basis of information obtained here. Other information available independently tends to corroborate the existence of such a pledge.

Obviously it is impossible to know the truth without access to all the facts. It is a matter of public record that the Formosa defense mission of 1955 authorized the President to employ American forces to defend the coastal islands if necessary for the defense of Formosa. But that was merely permissive. General Phillips asserts that Secretary Dulles made an explicit oral pledge to Chiang Kai-shek in connection with the Nationalist evacuation of the Tachen Islands. John Bass in his biography of Mr. Dulles, declares that after China's President Chiang Kai-shek received a personal letter from Mr. Eisenhower assuring him that the United States would help defend Quemoy and Matsu.

If such a pledge actually was made, it would help to explain the failure to persuade Chiang to withdraw from the coastal islands during the 3 1/2-year interval after the last crisis. It also would explain some of the gyrations and anguish that preceded Mr. Dulles' attempt to extricate this country without injuring the defense of Formosa. Perhaps Congress will be interested in putting some pointed questions to an Administration which made a fetish of criticizing the secret diplomacy of Yalta.

In any event, if a promise was in fact made and if the Administration now is embarrassed by it, there may be consolation in the words of Abraham Lincoln in his last public address on Feb. 12, 1865:

... as has been said, I shall treat this as a broken promise, and break it whenever I shall be advised that keeping it is adverse to the public interest.